

July 16th, 2013

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

The New Mexico Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) system has served our rural veterans for many years. As the VA works to improve the overall health system for veterans in New Mexico, I would like to work constructively with the VHA to improve the quality of care at these facilities and identify areas for improvement. Furthermore, I would like to engage in a dialogue to address systematic problems which may prevent these and similar CBOC's from meeting full staffing requirements.

Last month the Senate Appropriations Committee included an amendment I sponsored which would require the VA to fully assess all VA CBOCs. This report would include an assessment of "possible expansions and improvements required to meet applicable medical requirements and meet applicable laws." While the appropriations language has not yet become law, I would ask that you begin the work of assessing rural and highly rural CBOC's so that the Congress and the VA can begin to determine how best to prioritize funding in the future for existing CBOC's. In this time of limited funding and resources members of Congress must have the necessary data so that both the Congress and the VA can better prioritize major projects to support our rural veterans.

In New Mexico, I have heard repeatedly from many veterans who are very concerned about the facilities that serve them, including the Santa Fe and Artesia clinics. The VA is working to replace the existing facilities in order to better serve veterans in those regions. I support the VA's efforts to construct new facilities but would like to express the concerns of multiple veterans regarding problems in the existing facilities. Specifically, I would like to know what the VA can do to help mitigate the problems at these and other facilities while still prioritizing new construction. While temporary fixes to these existing facilities are not a long term solution, I believe that it is important that the VA assess whether these and other CBOC's should be prioritized for additional funding until new facilities are completed.

In addition to the Santa Fe CBOC, of utmost importance to many veterans in northern New Mexico is the timely completion of the new Raton CBOC. As you know, this project has been plagued with delays in the past, and the Raton and surrounding veterans' community are concerned about any further delays. While I am happy that the VA has begun to make progress I

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would urge the VA to continue to press forward on this project to ensure that there are no further delays.

While the facilities are in themselves important for meeting the arduous standards of care required by the VA, support for the people who staff these facilities is of the utmost importance. What has prevented the VA from meeting full staffing requirements at rural locations in New Mexico and what are the VA and the VISN doing to address these issues? I have been informed that nearly all of New Mexico's CBOC's have experienced difficulty with retaining and hiring qualified individuals. I am particularly interested in learning what more can be done to incentivize health care professionals to serve at a VA CBOC and how the Congress can support current and future efforts to recruit and retain medical professionals to serve rural veterans. The VA needs to examine its existing authorities for options along these lines and if necessary make legislative recommendations to Congress to address this longstanding problem.

Finally, I am looking forward to continuing the work to expand telehealth to rural veterans. I believe that this new technology is already making a difference in rural veterans' lives. I am particularly interested in how the VA is working to integrate specialty care into telehealth in order to reduce the need for veterans to travel long distances to major urban areas such as Albuquerque to receive care.

Thank you for your continued work to serving our veterans in New Mexico and please keep my office apprised of the VA's progress on these issues.

Sincerely,



Tom Udall
United States Senator

CC:

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